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PROGRAM Morning Edition

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SUBJECT Contra Aid

BOB EDWARDS: With the inauguration over, Congress will be getting back to work soon. And one of the key issues on its agenda will be the question of funding for the so-called Contras, the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan rebels that the Administration calls freedom fighters. U.S. aid to the rebels has been funneled through the CIA since 1981, but those funds ran out last September. The Administration would like to renew that aid.

One of the most important congressional figures in the upcoming Contra aid debate will be the new Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Minnesota Republican David Durenberger.

NPR's Bill Buzenberg has more.

BILL BUZENBERG: David Durenberger is a Republican moderate, both in tone and political philosophy. A former corporate lawyer, he was first elected to the Senate in 1978 to complete Senator Hubert Humphrey's term. Durenberger becomes the new Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee because of something called the eight-year rule. That rule requires the Senate to rotate membership on the Intelligence Committee so no senator will get too close to the CIA. Under the rule, the former committee chairman, Senator Barry Goldwater, and four other conservative Republicans had to step down after serving their eight years. Durenberger was next in line.

Conservatives worry that, as chairman, Durenberger will torpedo the President's plans to aid the Contras. Well, he will and he won't. Durenberger says he supports assistance to the so-called Nicaraguan freedom fighters. What he doesn't support is covert assistance to the Contras because it's no longer really covert.

SENATOR DAVID DURENBERGER: I happen to think that covert action is a very important part of the implementation of national security policy. I think as long as it's that important, that every effort be made to be sure that we never run covert actions that are not covert action.

BUZENBERG: That's exactly what the Administration is trying to do now, Durenberger says. They want an overt or open covert action. But it won't wash, he says, because an openly acknowledged covert action erodes confidence in the CIA, tends to become a substitute for a real policy, undermines legitimate covert actions, and confuses people.

SENATOR DURENBERGER: I'll bet you there isn't two percent of the people in this country that understand exactly what the U.S. policy is in Nicaragua. And it has been confused by manuals, by mining of harbors, by alleged atrocities. I mean there's no way that you'd understand what it is that we are doing there and what we expect to come out of it. And that is simply because we've confused the policy with the implementation mechanism, which is the CIA.

BUZENBERG: So, while there are plenty of congressional critics of American aid to anti-Sandinista rebels, Durenberger is not one of them. He'd like to see that aid made strictly overt, and not channeled through the CIA.

That kind of policy, instead of covert action, may have more support on Capitol Hill from moderates, such as Durenberger. The Administration is now consulting with key congressional leaders and considering what kind of request it will make to Congress on behalf of the Contras.

SENATOR DURENBERGER: I think now the process starts of what should we be doing. And from State, from NSC, from Defense, from a variety of sources, including my own contribution here, opinions are being gathered about where that policy ought to go and how it ought to be implemented.

BUZENBERG: In just the last week, the Administration has made three moves that suggest it's clearing the decks specifically for a new policy toward Nicaragua.

Move number one: National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane just returned from a quiet high-level trip to every Central American capital except Managua.

Move number two: On Friday the Administration announced it was boycotting further World Court consideration of Nicaragua's suit against the United States.

And move number three: Again on Friday, the Administration suspended direct negotiations with Nicaragua.

Senator Durenberger supports all of those moves, and he hopes the Administration is coming up with something new for Nicaragua. Because if officials try to sell the old policy of more covert aid, Durenberger warns that will undoubtedly require an Intelligence investigation into allegations involving past Contra practices.

Democrats on the Intelligence Committee would like such an investigation to consider the kinds of charges made by groups such as Witness for Peace.

Yvonne Dilling is director of that organization's Washington office, which is compiling a report on what they found in Nicaragua.

YVONNE DILLING: Witness for Peace has found that, in fact, the U.S. is funding what we would term international terrorists, and they are committing acts of terrorism against the common people of Nicaragua, against the people's businesses and against their farms and against their schools and hospitals. The Contras have killed children, they've killed grandparents. They have kidnapped many, many people. They have targeted teachers, doctors, nurses, agricultural technicians.

BUZENBERG: When Senator Durenberger was asked if these are the kinds of things his Intelligence Committee should investigate, his answer was noncommittal.

SENATOR DURENBERGER: Well, frankly, we are all much better off looking ahead than looking back. To the degree that past practices, proven, are an indication of what the future is going to bring, it is appropriate to look back. Whether it is productive for us to analyze the activities of the Contras, I will leave to the judgment of the committee as we start into the process of setting an agenda. They have enough to do without making themselves a judge and jury.

BUZENBERG: Republican David Durenberger, the new Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who favors overt instead of covert assistance to rebels in Nicaragua.